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*European Office: Lime Tree Farm, East Hagbourne, Berkshire, England. Telephone Didcot 3317

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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE 6-1858.

Evolution or Catastrophe*

Ever since the days of Herbert Spencer, observers have been struck by the fact that human societies frequently seem to resemble biological systems in some aspects of both evolution and structure. The mechanisms involved, of course, have been quite different, as has been pointed out repeatedly over the years. The capacity to react sensitively to information, to conserve, communicate, and use it, and constantly to accumulate new stores is central to successful evolution in either context. But the biological mechanisms of accumulation, selection, use, and transfer of information differ in obvious and extremely important practical ways from the mechanisms involved in the accumulation, use, and transfer of social information by the processes of learning and through the medium of culture. The potential for what is in effect the inheritance of acquired characteristics confers upon the evolution of the culturally mediated society a dynamism, a flexibility, and a versatility that the biological organism or system can probably never remotely match. The obvious penalty attached to this versatility and flexibility, of course, is a degree of vulnerability also seldom matched in the biological world, as the disappearance of past great civilizations bears silent, poignant witness.

But these differences of mechanism, conspicuous and indeed basic as they are, should not obscure the parallel requirements for success that face the evolving society and the evolving organism. There are a number of such similar requirements. They are characteristically elementary, and by that very token may be especially noteworthy. Thus, precisely as in the biological world, there is a sharp limit to the rate at which evolutionary change can take place in social evolution, and to the magnitude of any given step, if the innovations are to be successful and if the society that they will affect is not to be severely disoriented or even crippled by the process. As in biological evolution, effective social evolution must be at once radical and conservative, freely embracing the new yet scrupulously preserving basic and well-tested elements that have had a high survival value in the past and which remain relevant to the present. Like successful biological evolution, successful social evolution must constantly guard against discarding the essential with the trivial.

The more rapid the social evolution, the more imperative becomes this requirement and the more vigilance is demanded to satisfy it. Through history this has been one of the most difficult lessons for man to learn. Repeated failures to understand it or to act upon it adequately must have accounted for major historical debacles—and indeed for major distortions of social evolution. It is a danger if anything more acute today than ever before, because of the immensely increased dynamism of social movements and evolutionary forces with which we live, and because the stakes of failure, like those of success, are so much higher than they have ever been. It would be difficult to find a more apposite general caveat for our time than this of exercising due care that, in embracing new and experimental courses on myriad fronts of movement with the ardor that we must, we do not at the same time discard long-tested values and long-tried adaptive courses which, if they are lost, will only have, one day, to be re-won—and probably at enormous cost. This is a consideration that is before us in all our affairs, every minute of every day. —CARYL P. HASKINS

* From the *Report of the President, 1966-67* (Carnegie Institution of Washington, Washington, D.C., 1968).